

## CONTESTATION AND REPRESENTATION: New Forms of Religious Authority in Disruptive Indonesia

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### Abstract

*This article seeks to elaborate the roles of some Muslim scholars and activists who, thanks to the advancement of internet technology, have shaped new forms of religious life in Indonesia. Using social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, they advocate their ideas and attract followers from Muslim groups. These Muslims are divided into four ideologies, namely conservative, moderate, liberal and traditionalist. As this article argues, thanks to their online activism, they successfully shape a new religious authority replacing the old model. Nevertheless, as this article also suggests, religious activism on online media outlets does not lead to the pluralism of religious views and understandings. In contrast, this activism creates the so-called echo chamber or isolated bubbles, which means that the activists' voices are only observed by their limited followers. Taking the activism of most popular conservative activists Felix Siaam, it sees that his view reverberates only among his social media followers and fails to attract those who embrace other views or ideologies. The followers of the*



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*moderate, the liberal, and the traditionalist on the other hand tend to be heterogenous creating a noisy minority. This leads to the vibrant and robust religious discourses.*

*[Artikel ini mengkaji tentang sepak terjang cendekiawan dan aktivis Muslim yang berkat kemajuan teknologi internet telah membentuk semacam habitus baru kehidupan beragama di Indonesia. Dengan memanfaatkan media sosial seperti YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, dan Twitter, mereka berhasil mengadvokasi gagasan-gagasannya dan menarik pengikut dari kelompok Muslim di Indonesia. Kelompok Muslim ini terbagi menjadi empat ideologi: konservatif, moderat, liberal dan tradisional. Berkat aktivisme di dunia maya itulah, mereka berhasil membentuk otoritas keagamaan baru menggantikan model yang lama. Namun demikian, artikel ini berkesimpulan bahwa aktivisme keagamaan di media online itu tidak mengarah pada pluralisme pandangan dan paham keagamaan. Sebaliknya, aktivisme ini menciptakan apa yang disebut ruang gema atau gelembung isolasi, yang berarti suara para aktivis hanya diamati oleh pengikut mereka yang terbatas. Hal itu tampak pada gerakan aktivis Islam konservatif paling populer Felix Siauw. Pandangan-pandangannya hanya bergema di kalangan pengikut media sosialnya dan gagal menarik simpati dari mereka yang menganut pandangan atau ideologi lain. Sebaliknya, pengikut moderat, liberal, dan tradisional cenderung heterogen sehingga menciptakan kalangan minoritas yang bisung. Pada akhirnya hal ini melahirkan diskursus keagamaan yang dinamis.]*

**Keywords:** *Religious authority, Social-media, Contestation, Indonesia*

## **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, religious contents in Indonesia's online media have become one of the most constituting element in public sphere. Cyber world is the most important medium where religious narratives are disseminated and contested.<sup>1</sup> In the country, public participation in

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<sup>1</sup> Farid F. Saenong, "Decoding Online Islam: New Religious Authorities and Social-Media Encounters," *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review*, Vol. 29, 2021; Martin Slama, "Social Media and Islamic Practice: Indonesian Ways of Being Digitally Pious," in Edwin Jurriëns and Ross Tapsell (eds.), *Digital Indonesia: Connectivity and Divergence* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), p. 146–162.

democracy is coincident with the rise of public religiosity.<sup>2</sup> The new wave of new media has become a key factor to the rise of religious narratives in the cyber media. Apart from that, easy access to internet allows Muslim activists to make it an instant instrument in acquiring religious knowledge. Muslim preachers make internet as their important tools for its efficiency and many Muslims follow various programs offered in it.

As the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia is one of the largest Internet users in the world. This can be seen in the usage of Facebook and Twitter.<sup>3</sup> In relation to the access of religious knowledge and religiosity, a survey by *Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat*—Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM)<sup>4</sup> shows that 85% of students in Indonesia have internet access, 96% of which access internet through their smartphone. On the average they access internet for 8 hour 52 minutes per day. What is surprising is that, the survey shows, people who do not regularly access the internet seem to have moderate religious understanding. This means that internet has negative impact on its users. There are some surveys which show that internet plays an important role in shaping public religious understanding.<sup>5</sup> It also shows that internet leads to radicalism and extremism.<sup>6</sup> Despite the government attempts to control

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas B. Pepinsky, R. William Liddle, and Saiful Mujani, *Piety and Public Opinion: Understanding Indonesian Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Merlyna Lim, "Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 43, No. 4, 2013, pp. 636–657.

<sup>4</sup> Hamid Nasuhi and Abdallah (eds.), *Pelita yang Meredup: Keberagaman Guru Sekolah/Madrasah di Indonesia* (Ciputat: Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM) UIN Jakarta, 2020); Ismatu Ropi and Didin Syafruddin (eds.), *Gen Z: Kegagalan Identitas Keagamaan* (Ciputat: Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM) UIN Jakarta, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> PPIM, *Beragama di Dunia Maya: Media Sosial dan Pandangan Keagamaan di Indonesia* (Ciputat: Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM) UIN Jakarta, 2020), accessed July 30, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2017, pp. 77–98; Charlie Winter et.al., "Online Extremism: Research Trends in Internet Activism, Radicalization, and Counter-Strategies," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol. 14, 2020, pp. 1–20.

internet on terrorism, radicalism, and pornography, people find it easy to find the contents they like. On religious matters, the survey indicates that religious authorities are not only held by the *ulama* (religious scholars) from Islamic mainstream organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, rather it varies greatly consisting a wide spectrum, from conservative, moderate, to liberal groups.<sup>7</sup>

In response to this, moderate Muslim groups have made various efforts to counter the contents of the conservative. This is especially true for the traditionalists who are more active in social media compared to the modernists. Not only they create content, they also hold offline discussions on various issues held from one place to another. By this strategy their network became bigger accommodating Muslims and non-Muslim as well. Gusdurian Network, an organization affiliated with NU, seems to be the largest internet user who campaigns religious moderation. This network is organized by Alissa Wahid, the daughter of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), one of the young Muslim leaders to be discussed in this article.

Digital literacy is currently cultivated among Muslim activists. Digital literacy does not only limit on how to use internet skillfully, but also how to use it for economic reason. Many Muslim groups offer digital literacy for public while at the same time attracting them to join the organizations. It is also used to combat fake news (hoax) which is currently serious in the communities. Digital literacy class are also offered for religious scholars in order to be able to upload their contents in internet platforms. It is offered to small and medium scale businessmen in order to be more competitive in the market.<sup>8</sup>

Based on this fact, it is clear that internet has shaped new form of religious especially among the youths. YouTube is used by preachers to disseminate their teachings. Many mosques which previously only held

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<sup>7</sup> PPIM, *Beragama di Dunia Maya...*

<sup>8</sup> Irwan Trinugroho et.al., "Adoption of Digital Technologies for Micro and Small Business in Indonesia," *Finance Research Letters*, Vol. 45, 2022, pp. 102-156.

religious learning (*taklim*) in a direct fashion have gradually used YouTube to disseminate their programs. A number of big mosques have regular YouTube programs. They not only able to reach far audience, they also get some money which can be used for mosque management.

Compared to other platforms, YouTube is the most popular one.<sup>9</sup> It is used by activists, Muslim scholars, Islamic organizations, and ordinary people. This lead to serious decline of the TV channels as most of the programs are broadcasted by YouTube. The second largest is Facebook. Many Muslim scholars upload their contents in Facebook completed with links to YouTube and Instagram.

What is religious authority? Religious authority is the ability of someone to define the correct beliefs and practices upon which he or she shapes and influences the conducts of the others. In Islam, authority belongs to *ulama* as they are the inheritors of the prophet and possess proper knowledge about religion.<sup>10</sup> While in classical *ulama* were defined as those people who went to *madrasah* (Islamic educational institution) to acquire knowledge, in the modern times people who have certain degree of knowledge about Islam can be regarded as *ulama* regardless whether they go to madrasa or not.<sup>11</sup>

This article examines the central religious figures in social media who shape Islamic religiosity of the Indonesian Muslim communities based on some observations and interviews with particular persons, accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The traffic as indicated by comments, like, and share (on Facebook) comment, love, and retweet (Twitter) and subscribe, like, share, and comment (on YouTube) are taken

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<sup>9</sup> Statcounter GlobalStats, "Social Media Stats Indonesia," *StatCounter Global Stats*, last modified June 2022, <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/indonesia>, accessed July 30, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1–3.

<sup>11</sup> Dindin Solahudin and Moch Fakhruroji, "Internet and Islamic Learning Practices in Indonesia: Social Media, Religious Populism, and Religious Authority," *Religions*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2020, pp. 19.

into account. Followers' comments are the most important data which tell many things about who they are and what they do.<sup>12</sup> It will be focused on, but not limited to, four Muslim figures: (1) Alissa Wahid representing the moderate group; (2) Felix Siauw representing the conservative; (3) Luthfi Asyaukani representing the liberal, and (4) Gus Baha representing traditionalist.<sup>13</sup>

The questions are how they construct and distribute religious discourses in their social media; what contents they advocate; and what are the relations between them and Muslim audience in general. It has to be acknowledged that their tweets, broadcasts, and postings have large impact on their followers, which means that they become the authoritative sources on religious understanding. To do this, an analysis of social network by focusing on the degree of virality based on the level of engagement is used. The degree of virality can be used by looking at response, reply and like. This virality indicate that their opinions are considered more influential in shaping Islamic religiosity of the Muslim community.

Further questions are what kind of contents are more influential than others? Why are they influential? To answer these questions one can look at the message delivered. What time they are delivered. It is obvious that tweets very much depend on time. An advice tween can be delivered at all times, specific tweets on specific time on a regular basis. Weekdays are usually selected for regular tweets. Weekend, while most people usually stay home, are selected for long tweets or thread. With this time schedule, the dissemination of religious knowledge will be effective.

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<sup>12</sup> Brian J. Taillon et.al., "Understanding the Relationships Between Social Media Influencers and Their Followers: The Moderating Role of Closeness," *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 29, No. 6, 2020, pp. 767–782.

<sup>13</sup> While Gus Baha and Alissa Wahid are from the same traditionalist *pesantren*, they represent different segment and subjects. Gus Baha is a traditionalist Javanese *kiai* whose followers are rural and whose subjects are mostly on Islamic *fikih*. Meanwhile Alissa Wahid is an activist whose segments are urban audience seeking to bridge between Islam and humanism, Islam and democracy and civil society.

## The Era of Disruption

People are talking about the era of disruption as a result of the advancement of information and technology. It refers to the conditions where new innovations come to the market and cause far-reaching impacts on life of the people. Some also say that disruption era is the era in which technology and society are evolving faster than traditional activities such as businesses can naturally adapt.<sup>14</sup> Internet makes the relations between religious scholars and their followers so open. Nowadays, Muslims prefer to seek religious knowledge through internet rather than attending religious gathering in an old fashion.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, they also can request *fatwa* (religious edict) from scholars at home and abroad.<sup>16</sup> This fact led to the so-called online fatwa. Traditional religious scholars are less popular compared to those ones who promote their teaching via internet.

The contestations of religious authority within Islamic websites have been challenged by the conservatives.<sup>17</sup> The conservative groups have made internet as a media to recruit new members. These new recruits will be invited to meet offline for further indoctrination. The meeting is usually held in mosques or *madrasah* where Muslim scholars regularly hold their religious gathering. New recruits who show interests will be appointed to become full members.

Another dimension of this contestation is the fluidity and the blurring features between Islamic teaching and Islamic activism. Internet

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<sup>14</sup> Yordan Gunawan and Hanna Nur Afifah Yogar, "Indonesia E-Hailing Taxi: The Competition Between Law and Technology," in Mohammad Nabil Almunawar, Muhammad Anshari Ali, and Syamimi Ariff Lim (eds.) *Handbook of Research on Innovation and Development of E-Commerce and E-Business in ASEAN* (Pennsylvania: IGI Global, 2021), p. 594–606.

<sup>15</sup> PPIM, *Beragama di Dunia Maya....*

<sup>16</sup> Rusli Rusli and Nurdin Nurdin, "Understanding Indonesia Millennia Ulama Online Knowledge Acquisition and Use in Daily Fatwa Making Habits," *Education and Information Technologies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2022, pp. 4117–4140.

<sup>17</sup> Yayah Khisbiyah and M Thoyibi, *Kontestasi Wacana Keislaman di Dunia Maya: Moderatisme, Ekstremisme, dan Hipernasionalisme* (Surakarta: Pusat Studi Budaya dan Perubahan Sosial, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, 2018).

does not only distribute the message of Islamic teachings, but it is also used as a medium to promote the interest of particular ideologies. This is particularly true for the Salafi groups who make the internet as medium to attack their opponents particularly Liberal Muslim Network (JIL) and Syiah.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, JIL uses internet to attack back the Islamist narratives.<sup>19</sup>

One of the results of these contestation is the strengthening of political identity in the form of fanatics towards particular religious understanding. The impact of internet can be positive or negative. Internet allows Muslims to meet and create dialogue over the diversity of religious understanding. It also allows the rise of echo chamber and isolated bubbles.<sup>20</sup> The last part makes Muslims even more fanatical to their groups; believing that the truth solely lies in their groups while others are misguided. This is made possible by the presence of scholars who distribute Islamist contents which evolve with particular political interests. In particular situation, the situation can be worse with the distribution of hoax.<sup>21</sup>

Initial studies on religious authority in cyber world have been focused on the issuance of religious edicts by the *ulama* in their blogs, websites and online forum.<sup>22</sup> This development is a global phenomenon

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<sup>18</sup> Asep Muhamad Iqbal, "Internet, Identity and Islamic Movements: The Case of Salafi Movement in Indonesia," *Islamika Indonesiana*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2014, pp. 81–105.

<sup>19</sup> Muhamad Ali Ali, "The Rise of the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) in Contemporary Indonesia," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2005, pp.1–27; Ali Maksum, "Discourses on Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: A Study on the Intellectual Debate Between Liberal Islam Network (JIL) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2017, pp. 405–422.

<sup>20</sup> Elanor Colleoni, Alessandro Rozza, and Adam Arvidsson, "Echo Chamber or Public Sphere? Predicting Political Orientation and Measuring Political Homophily in Twitter Using Big Data," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 2014, pp. 317–332.

<sup>21</sup> Birgit Bräuchler, "Islamic Radicalism Online: The Moluccan Mission of the Laskar Jihad in Cyberspace," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2004, pp. 267–285.

<sup>22</sup> Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2003); Heidi A. Campbell, "Religious

firstly started in the Middle East, Europe, and some Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia.<sup>23</sup> The *fatwas* are produced to provide Muslims in facing their religious life.<sup>24</sup> Online *fatwas* have been so popular due to their simplicity and flexibility.

Other scholars have initiated to look deeper by studying ideological transmission taking place in the contemporary development. The transmission of religious fundamentalism has been an important part of this development.<sup>25</sup> Most of these online scholars are of fundamentalist and Islamist who facilitate the rise of populists and extremists.<sup>26</sup>

## Media Social Figures

### *Felix Siauw*

Felix Siauw, a young conservative Muslim preacher (*ustaz*), is very popular. His followers on Twitter is 3.3 million. Every time he tweets, thousands retweet and like he got. Felix Siauw is more popular than other conservative preachers such as Aa Gym, Bachtiar Nasir, and so on. He was born in Palembang, South Sumatra to a Catholic family. In 2002, he converted to Islam and become a Muslim activist. Studying at Institute Pertanian Bogor (Institute of Bogor Agriculture-IPB), he began to get Authority and the Blogosphere,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2010, pp. 251–276.

<sup>23</sup> Nadirsyah Hosen, “Online Fatwa in Indonesia: From Fatwa Shopping to Googling a *Kiai*,” in Greg Fealy and Sally White (eds.), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), p. 159–173; R. Rusli, “Progressive Salafism in Online Fatwa,” *Al-Jami’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2014, pp. 205–229.

<sup>24</sup> Hosen, “Online Fatwa in Indonesia”; Jens Kutscher, “The Politics of Virtual Fatwa Counseling in the 21st Century,” *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, Vol. 3, 2009, pp. 33–45; Rusli, “Progressive Salafism in Online Fatwa...”

<sup>25</sup> Karine Barzilai-Nahon and Gad Barzilai, “Cultured Technology: The Internet and Religious Fundamentalism,” *The Information Society*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2005, pp. 25–40; Robert Glenn Howard, “Enacting a Virtual ‘Ekklesia’: Online Christian Fundamentalism as Vernacular Religion,” *New Media & Society*, Vol. 12, No. 5, 2010, pp. 729–744.

<sup>26</sup> Kieron O’Hara and David Stevens, “Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism: Assessing the Internet’s Complicity in Violent Extremism,” *Policy & Internet*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2015, pp. 401–422.

acquainted with Islam and joined Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), an Islamic organization which campaigns Islamic caliphate. Many of his tweets resonate the idea of Islamic caliphate. He tweets Muhammad al-Fatih, the Ottoman ruler who conquest Constantinople in 1453 and created it as his new capital named Istanbul. Felix describes al-Fatih as an ideal Muslim ruler who had never abandoned night prayer. He lamented the abolition of Islamic caliphate in 1928 by Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

Another issue which Felix Siaw is concerned with the life of Muslim youths. He encourages them for marriage instead of dating (*pacaran*). For this purpose, he wrote the book entitled *Udah Putisin Aja* (Got it Dumped), a campaign against dating practiced by many Muslim youths. According to Felix, dating is a sinister act which leads to serious problems. This campaign was so popular among the youths which make many of them decide to marry in relatively young ages. The book was designed in a girly style. The color was pinky with the picture of heart in the middle with the additional title “protect your dignity, achieve your honor”. The book contains various advice about the danger of dating filled up with pictures. It was very popular until it is brought into movie scene with the same title. Despite HTI was dissolved in 2017, to which Felix is affiliated, the *dakwah* (religious invitation) activities is continued. He is invited to attend various religious gatherings at home and abroad.

### *Alissa Wahid*

Alissa Wahid is the daughter Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), former President of Indonesia and the main figure of NU. Her full name is Alissa Qotrunnada Munawaroh Wahid. Completing her undergraduate in Universitas Gajah Mada (UGM) of Yogyakarta, Alissa was involved in many activities related to religious moderation. In 2010, she created Jaringan Gusdurian (Gusdurian Network). It was a media where people share ideas on religion, nation-state, empowerment, and humanitarian issues. Jaringan Gusdurian is very concerned with the minority issues

facing various injustice and discrimination from the state or from the majority groups. Its principles are related to the ideas of Gus Dur consisting of *tauhid* (the oneness of God), humanity, justice, equality, liberation, brotherhood, modesty, gentle, and local wisdom.

Jaringan Gusdurian is very active in promoting religious moderation. It accommodates Muslim as well as non-Muslim activists to discuss issues relevant to the organization. It also attempts to counter conservative groups such as HTI which brings the idea of Islamic caliphate. It offers various skills for audience such as digital literacy, movie-making, small and medium economy training, and various competitions for public. Gusdurian Network chose twitter as its main media to promote its message. As of July 1, 2022, it has 268.5 followers.

Religious moderation is currently a national project injected by Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) for its officials. It is Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, former Minister of Religious Affairs (2014-2019) who coins the term. Working with MORA, Jaringan Gusdurian offers religious moderation training for public. Alissa Wahid is one of those responsible for disseminating religious moderation for the youths. She uploads religious moderation program through various social media platforms. Alissa is very popular among the moderate groups continuing the legacies of her father.

### ***Luthfi Assyaukanie***

Luthfi Assyaukanie was born in Jakarta in 1967. Completing his undergraduate in Jordan in 1993, he pursued his master on philosophy in Malaysia and finished in 1995. He then studied his doctoral degree in University of Melbourne, Australia, and finished in 2006. Right now, Luthfi is a teaching member at Universitas Paramadina of Jakarta. Luthfi was the co-founder of Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network) or JIL in the early 2000. This network originated from a mailing list network which involved many people with the same concerns. Together with Ulil Abshar Abdalla, Luthfi disseminates some ideas such as the need for

critical thinking on religious matters. When mailing list discussion is no longer popular, he moves to Facebook as his main media and launches provocative ideas such as the death of philosophy, the end of religion, etc. In one of his postings, he argues that philosophy is a discipline which does not have future. He then told a story of a university alumni previously studied philosophy who hardly found a good job. Luthfi then concludes that there is no use to study philosophy. On the contrary, he supports those people who study science. He is the fan of neuro-science scholars such as Sam Harris who believe that religion can actually be explained from neuro-science perspectives. Recently he is very critical towards religion as it does not bring any solution to human problems. Instead, he prefers science and technology as the most ultimate answer to solve human problems.

Luthfi is very popular among liberal young Muslims. It is assumed that they used to be the members of JIL. The term liberal refers to ideas and attitudes which consider religion as the legacy of the previous civilization and identical with obscurantism. On July 4<sup>th</sup> 2022, he wrote: "The largest contribution of religion is foolishness. The more they believe to religion, the more fool they are."<sup>27</sup> Together with Hamid Basyaib, he organizes pro-science, a forum which believe that science can solve the ultimate problems of mankind. His languages are cynical and provocative.

Luthfi is constantly attacking religion and religious believers especially Muslims who believe in Islam without any critical sense. He admires Charles Darwin's evolution theory as it can explains the origin of the Universe. On the contrary many Muslim people reject this theory as the Universe is created by God. He also admires Richard Dawkins, the British scientist and a self-proclaimed atheist. As of July 4<sup>th</sup> 2022, Luthfy's follower on Facebook is 20,000 people. Many of his postings are liked and widely shared. Despite his followers are relatively small, his

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<sup>27</sup> For this further statement, please visit his Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/assyaukanie>.

ideas have been influential especially among young educated Muslims who are not satisfied with conservative religious understandings.

Luthfi's audience is very limited consisting middle class Muslims with various backgrounds. Many of them have *pesantren* (traditionalist boarding school) background, while others have secular backgrounds. Many non-Muslims also join this group. The common platform is that they respect each other's ideas regardless their religious backgrounds. Luthfi recently made a serial discussion on philosophy and science. The discussion has been responded by those who considered that philosophy is still relevant. What makes Luthfi difficult to understand is that he never fully elaborates his ideas. Instead, he jumps from one issue to another.

### *Gus Baha*

His full name is Ahmad Bahauddin Nursalim. Gus is the label that indicates that he is a son of a Muslim cleric (*kiai*). He was born in Rembang, Central Java in 1970. After completing Quranic studies with his father, he was sent to KH. Maimun Zubair, the most renowned Muslim cleric among traditionalist Muslim community. Gus Baha is a young Muslim scholar whose expertise is Islamic knowledge particularly *tafsir* (Islamic exegesis), *fikih* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *hadith* (Prophet's tradition). Not only is he a *hafiz* (someone who memorizes the Holy Qur'an), he also memorizes the large parts of the books of *hadith* such as Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslims. He lives in his hometown Rembang, Central Java and takes care of his own *pesantren*.

Gus Baha is a low-profile Muslim scholar. Despite he has been criticized by the Salafi Wahabi scholars, he does not respond them directly. Instead, he introduces his ideas and gives clear indication on his own attitudes on particular matters. He is a moderate scholar which become the reason why he is admired by many including non-Muslims. He is very humble person, always wearing white clothes, black cap and sarong, and never wears turban like many kyai do. This indicates that he considers himself as a *santri* (student on *pesantren*). Humility is the one

of the most fundamental value that a student should behave. No less than Quraish Shihab admires Baha's expertise on the Qur'an and the *hadith*. Despite he never studies in the Middle East, he is able to write in Arabic. He composes some books on Arabic on various Islamic subjects. Most of his lectures are on public ethics. He always emphasizes that religion is basically the personal relations between men and God. Thus, he disagrees with those preachers who make judgments on the quality of human's spirituality. Whether or not someone is a believer or unbeliever is God's prerogative.

Gus Baha has been very popular over the last years. His lectures, which are in fact ordinary religious gatherings, have been broadcasted via social media platform such as YouTube and Facebook. His distinctive feature is that he addresses most of his lectures in Javanese language. Furthermore, his lectures are widely circulated among WhatsApp groups. It can be said that he is the most renowned traditionalist Muslim scholars nowadays who shapes the religious discourses in Indonesia. Responding to some opinion that *tablil* (the recitation of the word 'there is no god but Allah') commonly practiced by the traditionalist Muslims as heresy as espoused by the Salafi-Wahabi scholars, Gus Baha eloquently responds that it is otherwise as these words make unbelievers (*kafir*) believers (*mukmin*). He uses many wisdoms taken from the stories of Wali Songo (the nine saints of Java) to emphasize the importance of respecting local practices. This is to respond the Salafi-Wahabi *dakwah* which attack the religious practices of the traditionalist Muslims such as visiting the graves (*ziarah kubur*) and the annual commemoration of saints (*haul*).

Ordinary Muslim groups who have never been in *pesantren* hardly ever understand Gus Baha's lectures. He begins his lectures by quoting one particular classical Islamic book. Then the discussion become intense and deep. Among particular Muslim groups, Gus Baha is so popular. There are quotes associated with him circulated among Muslim

audience.<sup>28</sup> In the last Ramadhan, when Muslims were supposed to fast in the whole month, he said that those Muslims who did not fast not necessarily neglected the obligation. They would fast if all that possible. But because of the condition they faced, they did not. Likewise, he also defended those who were not able to do *tarawih* (recommended prayer in the night of Ramadhan) not to misjudge them. They would do so if all that possible. But because of the condition they faced, they did not. His wisdom is very much appreciated by many. In the mid of formalistic religiosity, the presence of Gus Baha is sensibly celebrated. It is this kind of *dakwah* that Gus Baha did that makes him so popular among the Muslim communities.

### From Mosques to Social Media

Mosque is house of worship. It is also the symbol of the unity of Muslim community. Muslim community erect mosques to hold collective Friday prayer as well as to hold religious gathering. In the previous decades, mosques had become the battlefield between the modernists and the traditionalists. Both groups erected their own mosques for their communities. But since the late 1970s, the rivalry between both groups have blurred as a result of the advancement of education and social life.<sup>29</sup>

The Salafi-Wahhabi emerged in Indonesia in the early 1980s. Their presence was fully supported by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia that began to export its educational system beyond its borders. Realizing the strategic roles mosques may have, in the late 1990s, Salafis began to build their own mosques. In the beginning, mosque construction was made possible by Middle Eastern donations, most of which were

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<sup>28</sup> “Tidak Bisa Tarawih Karena Profesi Pekerjaan-Ngaji Gus Baha di Bulan Ramadhan”, Channel Mensucikan Diri: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN0T8-tpgEY>, accessed July 30, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Jajang Jahroni, “Ritual, Bid’ah, and the Negotiation of the Public Sphere in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2018, pp. 1–35; Din Wahid, “Challenging Religious Authority: The Emergence of Salafi Ustadhs in Indonesia,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2012, pp. 245–264.

reportedly intended for mosque building purposes.<sup>30</sup> This fits with the Prophet Muhammad's words that "Whosoever creates a mosque in this world, God will create a house for him or her in Heaven" (narrated by Ibn Majah). For this matter, Salafi groups create a section within their organization, which specifically administers the donations for mosque construction. The amount of money needed varies between 40 million rupiah (about 4,000 US dollars), which is enough for a small mosque with traditional architecture style in the many villages around Indonesia, and 200 million rupiah (about 20,000 US dollars) to build a medium-sized mosque in the villages.

The construction of a mosque, however, is not necessarily as easy as one may think because of the role of mosques as symbols of unity of the Muslim community.<sup>31</sup> The presence of a mosque in a given settlement is important to enable Muslim men to perform their obligatory Friday prayers. When there are 40 male Muslims in a given settlement, they are obliged to perform the Friday prayers in their own settlement. This means that when this number is reached, a mosque needs to be constructed. When there are less than 40 Muslim men, they should perform their prayers in a mosque in an adjacent settlement. With this requirement, a new mosque is hardly ever constructed as long as it is able to accommodate the number of the congregants in the area or as long as there is only one Muslim settlement. Instead of creating new mosques, Muslims are more likely to renovate and enlarge already existing ones.<sup>32</sup>

In order to be able to create their own mosques, Salafis tend to create new settlements relatively separated from the other local Muslim

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<sup>30</sup> Jajang Jahroni, "The Political Economy of Knowledge: Salafism in Post Soeharto Urban Indonesia," *Ph.D Dissertation*, Boston University, 2015, <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/14005>, accessed December 19, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Humphrey, "Community, Mosque and Ethnic Politics," *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1987, pp. 233–245.

<sup>32</sup> Ridwan al-Makassary and Ahmad Gaus AF, *Benih-Benih Islam Radikal di Masjid: Studi Kasus Jakarta dan Solo* (Jakarta: Center for the Study of Religion and Culture (CSRC), Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah, 2010).

population. Salafis set up their own enclaves where they create their own institutions such as schools and boarding schools. In this way they are able to avoid tension or even conflict with the local Muslim population.<sup>33</sup> They also require Muslim groups who seek their donations for the construction of a mosque to at least build it 1 kilometer away from the neighboring one. This distance slightly varies from one place to place depending upon the density of the population. In most part of Java, particularly in densely populated urban areas, the construction of mosques is relatively easy and each Muslim group can create its own mosque. This is particularly true for new housing and apartment areas that arise in many urban areas, which indeed have their own mosque. Outside Java, this may be different. In Aceh, for instance, the regulation of one mosque for one settlement is still maintained and this prevents Salafis from penetrating into urban areas.<sup>34</sup>

In general, Salafi mosques are different from the mosques of other Muslim groups. They emphasize function over structure. One unfamiliar with Salafis would assume that their emphasis on functional features is due to limited budgets but this seems not to be the case.<sup>35</sup> In many areas, where Salafi groups have stronger financial resources, these features are still maintained. The construction of the mosque of the Wahdah Islamiyah in Makassar started in 2005 and it is still unfinished. It is made in a simple architectural style. That two-floor mosque can accommodate 1000 congregants. The first floor is used for offices and a studying room, while the second floor is for praying. Doors and windows remain uncarved and are painted in one or two bright colors. The walls and the ceramic tiles are also in bright colors to give an impression of peace and tranquility. There is only one square flat space inside the mosque and no

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<sup>33</sup> Mark Woodward et.al., "Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 7, No. 6, 2013, pp. 58–78.

<sup>34</sup> Noviandy Noviandy, Irwan Abdullah, and Moch Nur Ichwan, "The Seizure of the Mosques as Public Spaces between Dayah and Salafi-Wahabi Ulama in Aceh," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2022, pp. 1–30.

<sup>35</sup> Jahroni, "The Political Economy of Knowledge..."

calligraphic ornaments. Salafis consider ornaments *bid'ah* (innovation in terms of heretical doctrine) that might disturb the people's concentration during their prayers.<sup>36</sup> A wall clock is put up close to a simple niche to indicate the five prayer times.

Salafi mosques are mostly named after their main donors and thus often carry Arabic names, for instance, the Zaid bin Hammad Mosque and the Muna al-Farsi Mosque. Some mosques are named after Salafi scholars such as the Jamil al-Rahman Mosque. While these names work well within Salafi settlements, they may not work for mosques in non-Salafi settlements. The names of non-Salafi mosques are mostly taken from *al-Asma al-Husna* (The Most Beautiful Names of God) such as *Bait al-Rahman* (the House of Beneficent), *al-Nur* (the Light), and *Bait al-Rahim* (the House of the Merciful). Given that Salafis provide the funds for mosque construction, as happens in some cases, they adorn the mosques with Salafi names. This raises criticism from non-Salafi groups who also use the mosque. This conflict may be resolved by putting the names of the donors in an inscription in the corner of a wall, while the official name of the mosque is taken from *al-Asma al-Husna*.

Salafis would claim the mosques they fund as Salafi mosques even though the local Muslim population around it are not Salafis. As a result, they regularly send their preachers to these mosques to instruct the local population about "true" Islam. These preachers prioritize lessons in *tawhid* and they combine their instruction with *hadith* especially those related to the everyday practices of the faith. By using this strategy, Salafis actually seek to reorient the religious perspective of the local population and to rid it of alien practices. When the people have been sufficiently introduced to *tawhid*, the next step is that the Salafis invite their audience to discuss *bid'ah* issues. This is hard and sometimes leads to misunderstanding. The local population may oppose this teaching especially when they think that it is offensive to its own religious practices. *Ustaz* Hasyim of Wahdah

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<sup>36</sup> Jahroni, "Ritual, Bid'ah..."

Islamiyah in Makassar admits that he has been working in a local mosque for more than fifteen years. Initially his audience consisted of only few people but now his lectures are attended by hundreds of Muslims.

Along with the extensive usage of internet, while serving on-site attendants, a number of great mosques in urban areas have uploaded their program through media platforms. This is to seek wider audience. The programs held by popular preachers are viewed by large audience, sometimes the number reaching hundred thousand even millions. The Salafi-Wahabi also use internet to disseminate their *dakwah*. Khalid Basalamah and Firanda Andirja are the most popular Salafi preachers. They also have YouTube accounts. This transformation indicates that the battlefield is moved to Internet. One by one Muslim preachers created their own platforms to disseminate their teachings.<sup>37</sup>

Twitter is the platform where people are engaged in twitwar. To be a good twitter, someone should tweet on a particular matter regularly to keep their followers read. The more regular they tweet, the more followers they have. If they are absent for a period of time, their followers will leave which mean that they are no longer enthusiast to follow the tweets. Gus Baha does not use Twitter, while Felix Siauw, Alissa Wahid, and Luthfi Asyaukanie do.

Based on some observation, a tweet can be viral if it follows some patterns.<sup>38</sup> *First*, the tweet is on general understanding on Islam. *Second*, the tweet is contextual, responding to actual issues. Information on general understand on Islam is still interesting for many Muslim audience as it could fill up their knowledge about Islam. Meanwhile a contextual tweet is interesting as it could give the answers the audience may have. A contextual tweet is usually related to the public curiosity on certain social or political issues. This kind of tweet can be viral. Virality is the condition when a particular tweet is uncontrollably responded either

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<sup>37</sup> Slama, "Social Media and Islamic Practice..."; Solahudin and Fakhruroji, "Internet and Islamic Learning Practices..."

<sup>38</sup> Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

liked or retweeted by a huge number of people.<sup>39</sup> It leads to many aspects and become trending topic for a period of time. Once a tweet becomes viral, it leads to popularity of the person who tweets it either positive or negative. A sensitive tweet accompanied by video can be really viral the consequence of it is hardly to imagine.

Beside regular tweet, people are sometimes engaged in a tweet war. A tweet war happens when a thread is replied by someone who have different opinion. It can be a long tweet taking many hours and days until both parties decide to stop. Timing is crucial on Twitter. Many people tweets advise and motivation in the morning. In the afternoon, people begin to launch provocative tweets. This is then continued in the evening, around 8.00 pm until 11.00 pm, when people begin for tweet war. Around five years ago, twitter has been packed with buzzers which makes it less interesting. This makes many people move to Facebook or YouTube.

On Facebook, people can make a posting consisting statements and “friends” can read them. These postings can be shared or commented. There is a long discussion about a particular matter on comment spaces. Sumanto Al-Qurtubi is a Facebook celeb whose postings are widely liked and commented. He is particularly concerned with Islamist groups in the Muslim communities termed *kadrun* (desert lizard). His postings are widely liked and shared. His postings have been published into books.

Since Facebook limits the number of “friend” to 5,000 people, many people create another account. By doing so, he or she can have another 5,000 friends. Another option is the one can move to Facebook Fans page where the number of fans is unlimited. Through Fans page they can write or upload anything. This is a paid application. Meanwhile on YouTube, Muslim preachers upload video on religious gatherings and their subscribers can watch them. Once the number of subscribers and watch times are fulfilled, YouTube channel begin to monetize, which make this platform is so popular. There is no information as to how

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

much is the money the Muslim preachers obtain from their YouTube platform, but a number popular Muslim preachers have earned money from YouTube on a regular basis. It can be seen for example through Social Blade or YouTube Money Calculator.

YouTube is so far the most widely used platform by Muslim preachers. Money earning and wide audience are the reason why this platform is so popular. Most of the TV preachers have moved to this platform.<sup>40</sup> Some preachers have broadcasted their regular gatherings into YouTube which means that they have double benefits from their programs. To do this, one should at least have a good mobile phone and is able to upload the video through his YouTube account. Felix Siauw has so far 1.22 M subscribers with 671 videos. Gus Baha does not have his own YouTube account, but his lectures are always broadcasted by various channels such as *Sababat Yusroh*, *Eling Gusti*, and *Santri Kopengan*. All these channels are organized by the traditionalist Muslim groups.

### **Where is the Battleground?**

In general, conservative preachers such as Felix Siauw is the most popular preachers on Twitter and YouTube. His tweets taken from various Islamic sources particularly the Qur'an and the *badith*, as well as the stories of Muslim scholars are well liked and shared. For ordinary Muslims, his tweets or his lectures on YouTube have become the most awaited ones. Most of his followers and Muslim youths who have been looking for "a true Islam" find their answers in his teachings. His popularity is related to the fact that he regularly quotes the Qur'an and the *sunna*, the two fundamental sources for Muslim believers. He tweets and lectures deal with Islam and Muslim life. Felix believes once Muslims practice Islam as expounded by the Prophet Muhammad and the *sababat*, Islam will arise again.

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<sup>40</sup> Nurhaya Muchtar and Jeffrey A Ritchey, "Preaching, Community, and Convergence: Use of Old and New Media by Progressive Indonesian Islamic Leaders," *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 76, No. 4-5, 2014, pp. 360-376.

Felix's followers view Islam as a religion based on the Qur'an and the *sunnah*. So the *dakwah* should be based on these two sources. They regard the *dakwah* promoted by the traditionalist scholars who quote various books written by previous *ulama* as something peculiar. This is even more so when the *dakwah* is based on mystical or philosophical notions considered not necessarily compatible with Islam. The characteristic of Felix's followers is that they are highly exclusive.<sup>41</sup> This means that his followers do not follow preachers from moderate or secular ones. So, they are basically trapped into echo chambers which means that the ideas are only circulated among themselves. This is the reason why the *dakwah* of the conservative preachers or scholars are limited to the conservative Muslim circles who in many ways have *pesantren* backgrounds.

Another reason why Felix Siauw is so popular among the youths is he romanticizes the golden ages of Islam.<sup>42</sup> In many occasions, he discusses Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph, as the prototype of a just ruler who is committed to implement the Qur'an and the *sunnah*. He claims that all the Ottoman rulers as caliphs and the last caliph Abdul Hamid II was overthrown by Kemal Attaturk, the founder of modern Turkey. Caliphate, a political leadership based on the teachings of God, is one the HTI important doctrines as opposed to democracy which is secular in character.

The theme of just ruler such as Umar ibn Al-Khattab and Mohammad al-Fatih espoused by Felix seems to be confronted with the image of President Joko Widodo who is unimpressive. It is safe to assume that there is a strong association between Felix's lectures and anti-Jokowi sentiments. These associations can easily be discerned during the general election in 2014 and 2019 when Jokowi was attacked by certain Muslim groups due to his lack of Islamic credentials. On the contrary,

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<sup>41</sup> Hew Wai Weng, "The Art of Dakwah: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siauw," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, No. 134, 2018, pp. 61–79.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

they support General Gatot Nurmantyo who is said to preserve ablution and never abandon the night prayer. During the 2019 general election, Gatot was approached by some Muslim groups to compete Jokowi. But he failed to gain the support.

Felix is the most popular HTI's preacher who is able to maintain HTI followers after its disbandment. Based on some information, the programs of the HTI remains active in many areas. They infiltrate other organizations to disperse their teachings whose presence is considered a threat to national unity. Despite this allegation, Felix continues to flourish.

Alissa Wahid has been so popular among Indonesian Muslims, but her level of popularity is far below Felix Siauw. Despite the fact that Alissa is very influential among the Muslim community, her popularity is still limited to the young moderate Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Siauw's followers seem not to be interested to follow Alissa. This means that there is deep cleavage on the social media. The conservative groups are very selective as to which preachers or scholars they listen. This is understandable considering the fact that they conservatives view social media platform such as YouTube as another form of instruction or training. On the contrary, a significant number of Alissa's followers seem to watch Felix's video just to have some ideas what he is talking about. Not only that, they also watch the Salafi preachers' video for the same reason. This means that the moderate groups have a large range of reference in social media which then add to their religious discourses.

The popularity of Alissa is supported by the fact that she is the daughter of Gus Dur. So, it is safe to assume that many of Gus Dur's supporters follow her. After Gus Dur passed away in 2009, Alissa reenacted those people who, being inspired by her father, have been struggling for justice and equality in the country, and this reenactment is formulated in Jaringan Gusdurian. The Jaringan Gusdurian is linked with local organizations which have the same ideology. Furthermore, collaborating with NU which has its national branches across the country,

Alissa moves to flourish, disseminating religious moderation. Based on my observation, Jaringan Gusdurian is the largest organization in the country which uses media social platform to disseminate its teachings. Through this network, a new generation of activists are born.

One of the Gusdurian whom I know personally is Aan Anshori, a Jombang East Java-based activist who establishes Anti-discrimination Islamic Network (JIAD). As seen from its name, this organization is combating all forms of discrimination in his home-town and its surrounding areas. Moreover, Aan is very active in inter-faith dialogue especially between Islam and Christianity. He frequently visits churches and seminaries to give talks on various issues. Aan is a close friend with Alissa and like Alissa, he uses social media especially Facebook to disseminate his ideas. He regularly makes postings accompanied photos or videos on particular matters. As for 20 July 2022, his friends are 4.8 thousand people, his twitter 6.229 followers.

There have been numerous activists like Aan who support Gusdurians in local levels in Java as well as outside Java. They become the bastion of moderate Islam which serves to counter such ideas as HTI's caliphate. They also seek to cooperate with non-Muslim organizations which have the same ideology. Combating hoax and that occurred recently in the country is the most important agenda that the Gusdurians are concerned about. To do this, they create some programs on digital literacy targeting youths, Muslim preachers, students, and women. All the programs can be accessed via digital platforms so they can reach wide audiences. Furthermore, on several occasion, Alissa with Gusdurians collaborate with Muhammadiyah activists to promote the moderate Islam.

Despite the fact that Luthfi Assyaukanie's tweets and postings are limited to the middle-class urban Muslim groups with secular backgrounds, they are inspiring and yet provoking. Many traditionalist students or santri follow him as he challenges them to learn more. For them, his personality can easily be found within the traditionalist circles

as some kyai also show the similar idiosyncratic behaviors. He is seen by his followers as a critical person, a life-time learner, and anti-religious establishment. He often introduces new books such as *Homo Deus*'s Harari as an important material to be discussed by anyone interested in the future of religion. He made several postings on this Israeli author who is pessimistic on the future of religion. Public response to his postings is diverse. Many agree with him with critical comments while others regard him as a cynical not to say blasphemy against Islam.

Meanwhile Gus Baha represents the most important traditionalist scholar who, arguably speaking, is able to use modern technology to disseminate his teachings. He is bridging the two worlds, the *pesantren* and the modern technology. This is an important aspect which differentiates him from the rest of *kiai*. His background in classical Islamic scholarship adds to his credentials and, with his humble gesture, greets his followers and conveys the wisdom that goes beyond his audience. He is acknowledged by Muslim as well as non-Muslim groups. His career as a religious scholar will endure in the following years to come replacing the conventional ones who only take care of their sanctuaries and not seek to experiment with modern technology.

## Conclusion

New forms of religious authority have been formed in Indonesia as a result of the advancement of information of technology. These forms have replaced the old ones previously belonged to the traditional religious scholars called *ulama*. Nowadays to seek religious knowledge, people do not need to go to *pesantren* or *madrasah*. Instead, they go to the internet and follow the scholars they like.

The presence of cyber religious scholars has been vital as they provide religious knowledge necessary for Muslim groups. They have created dramatic changes in the process of the transmission of knowledge. Millions have followed their media platforms and distribute

the contents to wider audience. Their videos or posting have been tweeted, distributed, and commented. Sometimes it becomes intense and yet provocative as some particular groups attack each other on one particular issue. A video, tweet or posting can go viral. This refers to a situation where the level and the theme of the discussion goes publicly uncontrollable.

Equally interesting is that the contestation of online religious scholars is the continuation of the previously established rivalries between various religious groups in Indonesia. At least there are four groups needed to be mentioned: the conservatives, the moderate, the secular and the traditionalist. The battleground that previously took place in mosques, as the most contested arena by several religious groups, are moved to the cyber world. Thus, Indonesia cyber world is very dynamic yet noisy.

The conservative groups generally have the largest followers compared to the moderate. However, their network has been identified exclusively. On the contrary, the rest of the groups are inclusive leading to a vibrant discussion in public. They played essential roles in the current religious authority in Indonesia.

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